

## **A History of Belleville**

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In the heart of the Mississippi Valley lies the city of Belleville, Illinois. It is located halfway between two oceans and is halfway between the nation's northern and southern boundries. Because of its location, Bellevillians experience all four seasons, but escape the severe northern winters. George Blair and countless others created the city of Belleville in the mid-nineteenth century and the city has an interesting history.

It is not known who was the first white man to set foot on the land where Belleville was established. However, contrary to the popular belief that Belleville was first settled by the Germans and French, it was American war veterans from the eastern seaboard. They were the soldiers under the command of Colonel George Rogers Clark. After their enlistment in the Revolutionary War had ended, some of the soldiers stayed here, while others journeyed back to Virginia and Kentucky. Whether they stayed or went back, these former soldiers were given land grants after the Revolutionary War. Some of the first settlers were John Teter, Abraham Eyman, William Mueller, John Primm, Martin Randleman, and Daniel Stookey.

Belleville is located near the center of St. Clair County. The county which is Illinois' oldest, was created by proclamation in March 1790, by General Arthur St. Clair, the governor of the Northwest Territory. It was decided that Cahokia would be the first county seat. Cahokia had been established in 1690 as a French mission station. French immigrants were attracted to this area from Canada by reports of mild climate and fertile

soil. The town became the second most important French settlement in the Illinois country during the French colonial period, 1763-1777. However, it would go from French control to British and finally American because of Colonel Clark.

Even before Belleville was officially designated as the county seat, the early settlers wanted a more central location from which to govern. Also, the Americans in the highlands began to outnumber the old French settlers of Cahokia. These American settlers wanted to be rid of what they felt were backward settlers. Furthermore, the area where Cahokia was located was river bottomland, which frequently flooded.

Therefore, in December 1813, a committee was appointed by the Illinois Territorial legislature to select the new county seat. John Hay, James Lemen, Issac Enochs, William Scott, Jr., Nathan Chamberts, Jacob Short, and Caldwell Cains were on the committee.

The committee met again on March 12, 1814, at the home of George Blair. His home was built in 1806, and the committee voted to locate the county seat on George Blair's land. The decision had been made easier because Blair had agreed to donate one acre of his land for a public square. The cornfield that would soon become the new county seat had been known as Compton Hill, but since the decision had been made to build the new town on Blair's farm, he wanted to change the name. He had found a place where a settlement would form that might be one of the most beautiful cities in America. He decided to select the French word Belleville, meaning "Beautiful City." It was ironic that the Americans who wanted to move the county seat from the French settlement would give the new town a French name.

Etienne Personeau built the courthouse in 1814 in Belleville, the site for the new county seat. With a charter from the state of Illinois, Belleville officially became a village

in 1819. However, the town did not prosper and grow until former governor, Ninian Edwards bought most of the town's land and had it resurveyed and sold lots to the new settlers from Virginia in 1825.

In 1826, there were only two German families living in Belleville. Between 1829 and 1832 the German population exploded. Germans were drawn to Belleville from Bavaria by the inexpensive, rich farmland and its closeness to St. Louis. The predominate languages changed from French and English and some Irish to German.

The German immigrants contributed a great deal to the growth of the city. German signs and beer gardens soon could be seen throughout the city. Germans quickly became a majority of the population by 1844. The village was officially incorporated as a city in 1850 and by 1855 grew to over 6,000 people.

As late as 1843 some of the streets were still dirt paths through cornfields, but soon streets emerged. When the village was first laid out, it was George Blair who named the first streets. Church Street was the eastern most street. The other north and south streets from the east to the west were Jackson, High, Illinois, Spring and Hill. The latter two names are no longer used. Today, they are named First, Second, Third and so on. The street, which passed through the public square extending east to west, was named St. Clair Ave., but was later changed to Main Street. Today the streets to the south are named after the presidents. For example, the first street south of Main street is named Washington.

Since becoming a city in 1850, Belleville, Illinois, has been home to thousands of people who wake up every morning in this "Beautiful City" and begin their daily

activities. Thanks to these people, especially the early immigrants who persevered through the hardships of the early days, Belleville still stands today as the county seat for St. Clair County in Illinois. [From Irwin F. Mather, *The Making of Illinois*; James R. Maxim, Belleville; Alvin Louis Nebelsick, *A History of Belleville*; George Washington Smith, *History of Southern Illinois*.]